

Starting Practices

Look for these seven features in primary classrooms that teach beginning reading and writing with an emphasis on informational text.

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For decades, U.S. educators have believed that children first *learn to read*, and then, around 4th grade, they begin to *read to learn*. This belief has long been reflected in K–3 classrooms, where beginning reading materials have largely consisted of stories and where informational books have rarely been read aloud to young children.

The Common Core State Standards call for a major shift in this thinking. The standards expect children to be reading to learn as well as learning to read from the very beginning of schooling. Dozens of research studies suggest that young children can handle this shift (for example, Pappas, 1993; Reutzel, Smith, & Fawson, 2005). In fact, many children appear to be highly engaged by opportunities to read about the world around them and to demonstrate their expertise on topics through their writing (Guthrie, McRae, & Klauda, 2007).

Here are seven things we should expect to see in primary classrooms that are effectively using informational text to help students learn to read and write.



First graders share with kindergartners the guides to 1st grade that they wrote.

1 Informational Text Used from the Beginning

No longer should Dick, Jane, and Spot—or modern-day characters such as Mrs. Wishy-Washy or Fly Guy—provide the only grist for beginning reading instruction. About half of the time, materials should be informational texts. Although it's harder to find them, informational texts appropriate for beginning reading instruction are available.

Patterned-predictable texts, which are often used when children are still developing an understanding of basic print concepts and print-to-speech match, can be informational.

Out to Use in K–3



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For example, the book *What Grows Here?* by Santina Bruni (National Geographic Society, 2003) follows this pattern: “What grows here? Cactuses grow here. What grows here? Water lilies grow here,” and so on.

Decodable texts, which can help address Common Core State Standards related to decoding, can also be informational. For example, the book *Who Has a Bill?* by Judy Nayer (Scholastic, 1997) notes the uses of different types of bird bills, as in “The bird will sip with it” . . . “The bird will tap with it” (pp. 2–3). The website TextProject.org has

many sets of free, downloadable, four-page informational and other books written especially for beginning readers. (It also offers sets of free downloadable informational texts for older children to read over the summer months.)

In these examples, as in many informational texts for beginning readers, much of the information is conveyed through the photographs or illustrations. Through these graphics as well as the written text, children learn *through* reading while they are learning *to* read.

2 Informational Text

Read-Alouds

Even with information-rich graphics, there are limits to the content knowledge that young children can comprehend through texts that are easy enough for them to read themselves. For this reason, approximately half of read-alouds should involve informational text.

Such read-alouds should be combined with engaging instructional activities—asking students questions about the text, having them discuss the text with partners and then share with the group, having them fill out graphic organizers as the teacher reads text aloud, and so on. Figure 1 gives some examples of how teachers can design such instruction to support students in working toward Common Core English language arts and literacy standards.

3 Sets of Related Texts

Gone are the days of reading a text on one topic, then another text on another unrelated topic, and so on. The Common Core standards explicitly call for reading sets of related texts: “Within a grade level, there should be an adequate number of titles on a single topic that would allow children to study that topic for a sustained period” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010, p. 33)

Text sets not only build students’ knowledge, but also allow us to focus on specific Common Core State Standards, most notably Standard 9, which deals with multiple-text reading. For instance, Standard 9 asks that 1st grade children “identify basic similarities in and differences between two texts on the same topic (e.g., in illustrations, descriptions, or procedures)” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 13). Educators can compile sets of texts in advance on topics to use in read-alouds and small-group reading.



A K–3 classroom should immerse children in informational as well as literary texts.

4 An Informational-Text-Rich Environment

Researchers and educators have long emphasized the importance of the classroom literacy environment for young children (for example, Wolfensberger, Reutzel, Sudweeks, & Fawson, 2004). Following this thinking, a K–3 classroom should immerse children in informational as well as literary texts. The classroom library should include large numbers of informational texts. Classroom walls should include lots of informational text: posters (museums and public agencies are a good source); informational articles in high-traffic spots (for example, where children line up); and children’s own informational writing. Teachers can post directions—which the Common Core State Standards identify as among the genres that K–5 children should read—throughout the room.

For younger grades, dramatic play settings can include informational texts related to the theme, such as maps for a camping play theme. Older children can populate a “Did You Know?” bulletin board with interesting facts from texts they have read.

Technology in the classroom should also direct students’ attention to informational text. Websites with informational text for young children, such as National Geographic’s *Young Explorer!* magazine for grades K–1 (<http://ngexplorer.cengage.com/ngyoungexplorer>), should be bookmarked on the computers students use. A listening center should include

recordings of informational books as well as literary texts.

5 A Lexically Curious Environment

Informational text for children typically includes a number of unfamiliar words. In kindergarten and 1st grade, the Common Core State Standards expect students to ask and answer questions about unknown words in informational text. Teachers should model and praise questions about words. So often in U.S. schools, children are praised for displaying what they *do* know; in this case, we want to praise children for revealing what they *don’t* know—what they need to learn.

In grades 2–3, children are asked to “determine the meaning of words and phrases in a text relevant to a grade 2 [or 3] topic or subject area” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, pp. 13–14). Even much older students have difficulty with this task, so explicit instruction is key. The teacher can use anchor charts to remind children of key questions to ask themselves as they make informed guesses about word meaning:

- Does the author explain what the word means?
- Does the rest of the page help?
- Do the graphics provide clues?
- Is there a glossary?

Coaching or guided practice is also important. In a lesson for 2nd graders, a teacher gave students excerpts from beloved author Jim Arnosky’s book *All About Manatees* (Scholastic, 2008). The students’ task was to use the context to try to figure out the meaning of specific words. For example, the teacher asked students to make informed guesses about the meaning of the underlined word in the following passage: “A manatee uses its highly flexible snout and upper lip to grasp vegetation to eat. Its diet consists of green aquatic plants.” Notably, this vocabulary work had a larger purpose: Students were studying manatees and

FIGURE 1. Using Informational Text Read-Alouds to Meet Common Core Standards

Grade Level	Sample Common Core Reading Standard for Informational Text	Possible Instructional Technique During Read-Aloud
Kindergarten	#2: With prompting and support, identify the main topic and retell key details of a text.	Ask open-ended, higher order questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is this text mostly about? • What are the three most important things the author has told us? Have students use turn-and-talk to share their initial thinking, then discuss as a whole class.
1st Grade	#3: Describe the connection between two individuals, events, ideas, or pieces of information in a text.	Provide clipboards with graphic organizers, such as a Venn diagram or chronological order chart, for students to complete and discuss as they listen to the text read aloud.
2nd Grade	#7: Explain how specific images (e.g., a diagram showing how a machine works) contribute to and clarify a text.	Use sticky notes to cover an image in the text being read aloud. Read the written text and ask children what they can learn from it alone. Then uncover the image and ask students what more they can learn.
3rd Grade	#1: Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.	Establish a consistent follow-up question, such as, “How do you know?” to ask students after they initially respond to a question. Encourage students to ask that same question of you and of one another. Eventually, they are likely to automatically include how they know in their initial responses.

Editor's note: Standards referenced above are from National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). Common Core State Standards. Washington, DC: Authors. Retrieved from www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy.

other endangered species to inform a writing project.

6 Teaching About Text

Even in kindergarten, you should see children talking about text itself—being metatextual. For example, the Common Core standards ask that kindergartners “with prompting and support, identify the reasons an author gives to support points in a text” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 13). Specific text features named in the standards for K–3 include:

Kindergarten: front cover, back cover, title page, author, illustrator

Grade 1: headings, tables of contents, glossaries, electronic menus, icons

Grade 2: subheadings, captions, bold print, glossaries, indexes, electronic menus, icons, diagrams

Grade 3: key words, sidebars, hyperlinks (pp. 13–14)

Across grade levels, the standards also refer to other components of text, including illustrations, topics, details, paragraphs, descriptions, procedures, individuals, events, ideas, and other pieces of information within a text.

Unfortunately, little research has been conducted on how to teach these text features to young children. In my experience, young children most thoroughly learn many of these features by producing the features themselves, either for their own texts or to add to published texts. For 2nd and

3rd graders, acquisition of text features may also be facilitated by engaging children with real-world texts for authentic purposes (Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007).

7 Opportunities to Share Information Through Writing

One of the most important characteristics of Common Core-aligned K–3 classrooms is abundant opportunities for writing. This includes not only the narrative writing so common in primary classrooms, but also opinion or argument writing (30 percent of writing) and informative/explanatory writing (35 percent of writing). From kindergarten on, students are expected to participate in shared research and

writing projects (independently in grade 3), recalling experiences and gathering information from sources. They are expected to use digital tools to produce, publish, and revise writing.

Clearly, the Common Core State Standards set ambitious goals for writing. Theory and research suggest that establishing compelling purposes and audiences for children's writing helps a great deal (Duke, Caughlan, Juzwik, & Martin, 2012). Although a story can arguably be of interest to any audience, informative/explanatory texts are written, outside schools at least, with a purpose in mind—to convey information to someone who doesn't already know that information and wants or needs to know it. In the classroom, we need to establish this kind of purpose for children's informational writing. And we need to pay careful attention to audience. A recent study of 2nd graders (Block, 2013) found that children wrote more effectively when they had an audience other than their teacher.

Some informational writing projects can involve children in writing about what they already know well. For example, 1st grade teachers Sonali Deshpande, Mallory Kairys, and Wendy Rothman had their students write guides to 1st grade for kindergartners. The teachers used read-alouds and discussions to remind students of their own feelings and questions when they entered 1st grade. They shared examples of published guides to serve as mentor texts. They routinely reminded students of their purpose and audience for writing. On the day when the 1st graders delivered their guides to the kindergartners, the excitement was palpable. (To view samples of students' guides, go to www.ascd.org/el1113duke.)

Other writing projects can involve students in writing about topics for which they need to conduct research. For example, students might read

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texts about sea creatures and then write pamphlets about those creatures for the city aquarium. Or students might conduct interviews to learn about notable people, places, and events in the community, and then use this information to write articles for a class magazine to be distributed at city hall.

Regardless of topic, informational writing lessons and coaching should focus on specific attributes of writing called for in the Common Core State Standards—for example, the 2nd grade standards that require students to “introduce a topic, use facts and definitions to develop points, and provide a concluding statement or section” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 19). In addition, I recommend teaching students about other valued qualities of informational writing, such as grabbing and sustaining the reader's attention.

From the Past to the Future

The notion that children must learn to read before they can read to learn is a relic of the past. The Common Core State Standards hold high expectations for students around informational text, and research suggests that even young children can meet these expectations.

K–3 classrooms that implement the seven components described here, among others, not only give young children a jump-start on learning content knowledge but also engage them in reading and writing that establishes a firm foundation for their future literacy development. **EL**

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